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ABSTRACT

An essay, often called a personal essay, familiar essay, lyric essay, the disjunctive or spiral essay, is a piece of writing which takes its form in the shifts and turns of a particular mind at work. The essay is a piece of writing which pays attention to and sometimes plays with form; often uses images and figures that are familiar with poetry; and sometimes breaks the rules traditionally upheld by school writing. The essay generally behaves more like fiction and poetry than any academic writing, and has at its center an "I" which speaks of itself. Essays have been marginalized in both English and literature departments as well as in creative writing programs. As a result, the essay is one of the best ways to think about breaking the boundaries between academic and creative. In composition studies today, students perceive it is risky to speak about themselves. However, there are many instances in which a personal viewpoint is required, and numerous examples exist of significant works of scholarship in which the personal is foregrounded. (PM)

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by Laura Julier

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Re-theorizing the Role of Creative Writing in Composition Studies:
Cautionary Notes towards Re-thinking the Essay in the Teaching of Writing

Laura Julier
a paper presented to the Conference on College Composition and Communication
New York City, 20 March 2003

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What I mean by "the Essay" in the title of my talk is that thing which used to appear in college composition textbooks and readers, by the likes of George Orwell, E.B. White, Charles Lamb, and maybe Virginia Woolf, if we were lucky, and which everyone says began with Montaigne. It's often called the personal essay, the familiar essay, the lyric essay, the disjunctive or spiral essay—a piece of writing which takes its form in the shifts and turns of a particular mind at work. These days it comes under the problematic heading "creative nonfiction," and is finding a home in creative writing programs. It's ironic: it appears that simply adding the qualifier "creative" has made it belong, but this has also thereby given rise to interminable discussions about terminology. Why "creative" if it's NON fiction? Why NON-fiction and not NON poetry? If it's nonfiction, does it tell the truth? is it factual? what makes it NOT journalism, NOT a VCR manual? Art? Artifice? Creative nonfiction has come to umbrella memoir, autobiography, travel writing, nature writing, perhaps literary journalism, and "the Essay," which is what I'm going to focus on here.

The essay is a piece of writing which pays attention to and sometimes plays with form, sometimes uses images and figures in ways that are familiar to poetry; sometimes breaks the rules traditionally upheld by school writing. But there are also these two key things: (1) the essay generally behaves more like fiction and poetry than like anything using the adjective "academic," and (2) has at its center an "I" which speaks as itself, often using that very word, so that no matter what its subject, the essay is clearly embedded in the point of view and voice of the writer. This focus on the "I," however it appears, does not mean that the essay necessarily inscribes a stable, static self or voice, nor a Romantic notion of individual consciousness. There are any number of writers and essays in which perception, the perceiving self, and that which may be known are all called into question, de-stabilized, multiplied, investigated. The essay is large, expansive in definition, long in history—a genre well-suited to several of the needs and challenges of postsecondary writing instruction. It encourages exploration. It is grounded in a personal voice, and makes use of (but does not stay complacent in) personal experience. It welcomes other voices into the mix, and welcomes as well contradictions, ambiguities, puzzles, and uncertainty. It encourages the mind to question

itself and its assumptions, and to do so in ways that are visible to the reader. In doing so, it encourages the reader to join in the process of thinking which the essay maps.

There is also irony in the fact that creative nonfiction's—and the essay's—new foothold in creative writing brings it to the last of the three historical divisions in the field of "English" in the 20th century. In all three, it has sat on the margins. Essays have been given scant attention by English or literature departments, even before they were called "creative." They aren't taught often, or foregrounded as literature. If you read Wordsworth's essays, it's as literary criticism; if you read Emerson's, they're discussed as articulations of a philosophical school or intellectual history. Virginia Woolf's essays are ornament for her novels, and anything by the likes of Addison and Steele is read primarily as part of survey courses to illustrate or "cover" the 18th century.

Essays have also been marginalized by creative writing programs, which far and away privilege the Big Two—fiction and poetry—works of imagination, sneered at when they move too close to "mere autobiography." And essays have been, ironically, not merely ignored but dismissed by composition studies—first dismissed because they were seen as high art, *belles lettres*, the province of an elite and limited group of readers of *The New Yorker*, and secondly as they were used in composition textbooks and readers, representing the modes or models approach to teaching writing.

Probably because of this marginalized status/position, it may be that the essay is one of the best ways of thinking about breaking open the boundaries between academic and creative, or academic and personal, cross-fertilizing the ways in which we talk about writing in all the venues most of us inhabit. We might think of the essay as a border crossing, a hybrid genre, especially as we discover the ways it is moving into and exploring digital and multimedic territories. Some people—my colleague Ellen Cushman is one—are already doing this work.

But recent experiences tell me that for the vast majority of our colleagues, our curricula, and our students, writing still exists within rigidly enforced sets of mutually-exclusive definitions. The intrusion of the "I"—the particular working of a particular mind, culturally- and historically-situated, this foundational feature of the personal essay—into the writing done in academic settings and for academic purposes has created some degree of craziness in our teaching and in our professional work. Consider the following three student scenarios:

I. When I teach first-year students, and I ask what kinds of things they learned in high school about writing, they name a predictable set of rules, one of which is "Don't use I." When I give directions for what is often the first

assignment—begin to write your literacy autobiography— they ask, "Can I use I?" I try to use humor to make them see the absurdity of the question, but I empathize with the fact that they are asking what is to them a real question: is it <u>really</u> okay if I break the rules for school-writing? are you sure? I'm not going to be penalized for this, have this backfire on me?

II. A couple of years ago, I taught a senior-level English course titled Nonfiction Prose by Women. I focused the course on essays, on the representation of self—the uses of "I". We read personal essays by Nancy Mairs, Pat Mora, Alice Walker (among others). We also read essays of cultural critique by writers such as Ana Castillo and Ursula LeGuin—essays which foreground the "I" of the writer very little or not at all.

The five assignments in that class asked students to respond to the rhetorical, stylistic, or formal strategies these writers used to represent the self in their essays. We talked about what it meant for Ana Castillo to insist on using both Spanish and English, and not offering translations of the Spanish. We talked about Ursula LeGuin's use of the gestures of fairy tale, her use, as a white woman, of Native myths. We talked about the nonlinear structure of Alice Walker's essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," the assertive self-labeling of Nancy Mairs' "On Being a Cripple," and the relentless self-interrogation of Minnie Bruce Pratt's "Identity: Skin Blood Heart."

Not all of the students in that class were literary studies or writing majors, and periodically several of them would talk about the ways the proscription against "self," in writing which they produced for their courses in other disciplines or in their majors, was communicated to them. I had written each assignment in two parts: students could write essays on any subject at all, including the readings themselves. Whether they used "I" or not, whether their subject was some aspect of their own experience or some aspect of the texts we read, I asked them to confront and experiment with various ways of inscribing themselves—explicitly as "I" or implicitly.

And in calling them essays I suggested that they did not have to be written in standard academic style. They were free to play with form or choose whatever conventions of form they wanted. They might write primarily narrative, like Walker. They might write for an occasion, as LeGuin often does. They might write as Rich does in her essays on Emily Dickinson and Anne Bradstreet, or on her own early poetry, or as Walker does in her essays on Zora Neale Hurston. In other words, I gave them freedom to roam the entire range of choices and strategies the essay claims.

Two of these students came to me (separately) more than halfway through the semester frustrated and somewhat angry because it seemed to them that I was requiring them to write about themselves and (in the words of one) they didn't want to look that closely at themselves. When I pointed to the two options in each assignment, one said she hadn't noticed it, and the other told me she didn't take it seriously, that it seemed like an "out" which wouldn't be valued or graded as highly by me. I pointed to the number of essays we had read in which the writer did not speak directly about herself, or used "I" very little or in coded ways. No, I was told, those weren't as interesting as the other readings. Even when I pointed again to the fact that I had created two versions of each assignment, with no indication that one was preferable over the other, and to the fact that individual essays were not given grades (I used portfolio grading), each persisted in telling me that it was nevertheless clear which option they were "supposed" to choose.

III. Last year, as part of her program in Critical Studies in the Teaching of English, a graduate student undertook an independent study in which she engaged a similar set of texts—essays by women which in varied ways forefronted the presence of the writer—in other words, used "I." She read essays of cultural critique by Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff, personal essays by Alice Walker and Virginia Woolf, essays which play with form, such as the disjunctive essays of Susan Griffin. All these essays are both taught and read in various levels of composition studies, appearing, for instance, in Bartholomae and Petrosky's multi-editioned, long-lived textbook, *Ways of Reading*. She read these essays as "Literature," not as theory. Several times she said she wasn't sure how she was going to justify including this course in her program, because it was too much fun, seemed to have nothing to with the teaching of writing. This opened an area of discussion between us about the uses of the "I," the personal voice, and the uses of personal experience in teaching writing. We talked about the ways in which the personal was for these writers (and might be for her community college students) a rhetorical means of inserting previously-marginalized voices into public discourse. That it might, if used in proscribed situations, be a subversive move in itself. That it might, for women, be a way of calling into question notions of what a woman's "I" might be able to speak. Essays such as those by Woolf, Rich, and Cliff, for instance, had indeed enacted those critiques so powerfully that they have become well-known articulations of theory in women's studies. She began to see the essays I asked her to read not only a means to tell a story, not a means to evade multiple points of view or critical analysis, but rather as a standpoint for critique.

After reading these essays, and making some attempts in her own writing to enact some of these strategies, break some rules, use "I" to talk about intersections between personal experience and theory and philosophy in teaching writing, her discomfort was palpable and audible, though not in words. Finally, one day she said "Speaking out and breaking the rules is all well and fine, but what good does it do if no one will publish it?" When I pointed out that all these were published, she asked, "How will it change things if no one reads it because it's published in such inaccessible, small circulation periodicals?" And when I suggested that the fact that she was reading them now, in an academic setting, was an indication that indeed they had been read, she said, "But that's okay for these writers because they were already well-known." Finally, with both resistance and resignation in her voice, she said, "Well, I guess I've been trained well—we [and here she meant her cohort of graduate students] can't get away with this."

Because she, like many of us, had come to composition studies from the field of literary studies, I asked her whether she had read or heard her professors speak of Jane Tompkins' much-discussed and often-referenced 1987 essay, "Me and My Shadow." No, no mention of it. I directed her to some of the essays which had been published in the major mainstream journals in her own field ten to twelve years earlier: Elizabeth Flynn's "Composing as a Woman" (*CCC* 1988); Nancy Sommers' "Between the Drafts" (*CCC* 1992) and "I Stand Here Writing" (*CE* 1993); Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias" (*CE* 1994). I told her to read Bonnie Sunstein's *Composing a Culture*. I told her I was barely skimming the surface here.

She said, "I didn't know about all this. None of my professors talk about this work."

There are several threads and issues I hear being voiced in these scenarios which need to be of concern to composition studies:

First, the prohibition about the personal, or personal essay, in academic settings persists—and persists not as a carefully-reasoned and articulated choice about the nature of the speaking voice in academic writing or in the nature of learning, or the role of the self in knowledge-making, or even in any discussion about disciplinary conventions—but merely as a proscription. Despite over thirty years of arguments for encouraging novice writers to write about what they know, or write from personal experience to develop fluency, students are still arriving at college mouthing this tired old rule like puppets.

Second is how risky our students perceive it is to speak about themselves—and here I have to say that the majority of the writing classes I teach enroll almost all women.

There is another way of interpreting that element of risk, I know, and that is to see it as a nervousness about breaking rules. But I don't hear it that way. My students are fresh out of adolescence; they break rules all the time. They come late to class, often don't read assignments, try to see what they can get away with, leave their cell phones on, use fake IDs. This is not just about breaking rules, this is something else: speaking with "I" in any substantive way (distinct from the mindless verbal tic of "I think") makes them vulnerable. Whether it's first-year students, senior English majors, or graduate students, I find myself faced with the same deer-in-the-headlight, wide-eyed look whenever anyone suggests they can refer to themselves in the first person in their writing, or ground what they theorize in something close to home.

And yet, there is the third thing I want to point to, which is harder to hear and see, and to credit, which is that there are some situations which may seem to require speaking "I"—and in which not to do so may be discredited. I'll come back to this point about the expectation of the personal.

A final observation about the above scenarios is that the ways in which good work in our professional literature which brings an "I" into its writing and theorizing is not making its way—at all or enough—into classrooms, into what students are asked to study, into how students are socialized to enter professional and disciplinary communities. Bringing a self into one's scholarship appears to be reserved for the stars. This intrusion of the self into scholarly writing—into the theory and methodology of other disciplines—is no longer news, and yet students in those disciplines don't know about it, encounter it, or see its influence.

There are many significant works of scholarship in other disciplines in which the personal, or the presence of the writer, is foregrounded. Texts which break the conventions of "academic writing," and are grounded in a personal voice. They are also grounded in debates and differences about the presence of the self—the "I"—in academic writing: differences which have to do with questions about what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge counts, and who gets to say so.

Of the many that each of us could speak about as example, let me refer to just one. Anthropologist Margery Wolf, in her 1992 *Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility,* most compellingly, to my mind, enacts the theory and practice, and the risk, of blending the personal with the scholarly. Her book sets out a conversation among three versions of the same "event," each in a different voice and mode.

The first is the traditional written record of anthropological work in a Taiwanese village—the fieldnotes and data collected by researchers, provided by informants, written without reference to the researchers themselves. She followed, she says, the methods and attitudes about fieldwork, informants, and the role of the researcher prevailing at the time. The second is a "fictional" account of this event, which she wrote at the time she was collecting the data. And the third is a version which, unlike the first, retains and makes a point of analyzing contested meanings of the data, and the sources of data. It is a version in which the methodology itself becomes a subject of analysis. It is highly self-reflexive. Between each of these "versions" are chapters in which Wolf speaks about herself as writer, as reader, as researcher, as a scholar whose sense of the methods, subjects, and subjectivities shaping her field have shifted over the twenty years between the initial collection of data and the writing of her book. The personal shapes the book. It makes the method, the doubts, and the self of the scholar visible and vulnerable in multi-layered and profound ways.

In composition and literacy studies, the conversation begun in the '60s about personal writing continued well into the 1990s as an oppositional construction: personal vs. academic, Peter Elbow vs. David Bartholomae, mutually exclusive. As cultural studies has infused composition studies and composition theory has taken its "social turn," shifting its focus from the cognitive processes of individual writers to the relationship between texts and their social contexts, the conversation has turned from student writing to—what a surprise—our writing.

The September 2001 issue of *College English* featured a roundtable with a special focus on personal writing: "an informal dialogue among several prominent authors" exploring "the possibilities of a more personal form of academic discourse" (35). The elevation of this question to the level of "Special Issue" was influenced, guest editor Jane Hindman writes, by the following theoretical and disciplinary shifts: "emerging recognition of the qualitative researcher's role in constructing knowledge; feminist rhetoric's concern with the ethics of representation and the concurrent postmodern shift from the individual to subjectivity; English studies' fascination with blurred genres; critical autobiography's critique of a unified author; and expressivist pedagogy's promotion of students' need for a discourse authorized by their own experiences and cultural knowledge" (35).

Among the questions raised in the roundtable were the following: whether the personal was in fact a distraction from the work of qualitative research—whether including one's self shifted focus from the nature of the ideas to the person of the researcher; whether inclusion of the personal made the writer more vulnerable (to

misreadings); whether the presence of the "I" invited inappropriate probing, whether inclusion of the personal had in fact become an expectation, a requirement—and (in the kind of reversal I described above with the student in my class) whether this new expectation that scholars place and identify themselves in their work in personal ways was just one more instance of "using confessional as a mode of social control" (36).

In an ironic sense, then, what some have claimed as the subversive power of personal writing in academic settings may, by its mainstreaming or by its becoming an expected or normal feature of scholarly discourse, actually undermine it: as John Schilb writes, "Getting people to reveal their private life is a prime way of disciplining them" (qtd. in Hindman 36). Or as a respondent to this roundtable put it, those who get to speak their "I" must earn it (Daiva Markelis, *College English* July 2002: 726-27).

However, again as Schilb notes, the use of the personal in the writing of academic scholars in composition and literacy studies has also been a way for those from historically marginalized groups to recognize one another, to name and chart features worthy of further research—those who have been deprived of the right to say "I" and have it mean something.

I offer these scenarios, and the questions they raise as cautionary notes. I am not sure yet what to make of the seeming contradictions they evidence: speaking "I" is so risky that it is reserved for stars, who must do their work in traditional scholarly voices and only then earn the right to speak personally; and at the same time, this seems to be trickling its way "down" to an expectation that young scholars must get personal—reveal themselves—in their scholarship or else risk having that scholarship be dismissed as not theoretically sound. At the same time, however, speaking personally then is also a way that young scholars become vulnerable to a turn from their work to their selves at occasions of evaluation such as in tenure and promotion decisions.

Marjorie Wolf, Nancy Sommers, Jane Tompkins, Linda Brodkey were all well-established scholars when they got their "I" into print. Margery Wolf was able to write *Thrice Told Tale* only after establishing herself in the traditional ways. She writes, "There was a time—and not so long ago—that publishing [the fictional version] would have cast a shadow of doubt, a questioning of the legitimacy, over my mainstream anthropological publications" (50).

This is clearly still the case. I number myself among quite a few scholars I know who only after having achieved tenure turned to writing in more personal voice. Marianna Torgovnick tells the same story in "Experimental Critical Writing" (*Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction,* 2nd edition, eds. Robert L. Root,

Jr. & Michael Steinberg, NY: Longman, 2002: 264-68). What does that mean, I worry, for our younger colleagues, for our students, for ourselves, and for any hope that this will change? How do we create this choice to inscribe ourselves as "I" in our work as one more option for writers—not an expectation, not a transgression, not a risk, neither scary nor mandatory? How do we change the meaning of "I," so that that work which reveals and is inscribed by personal experience is not undervalued, dismissed, and marginalized—in the work that we all do.

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